HALLÉ

BENJAMIN BRITTEN: THE PRINCE OF THE PAGODAS

KAHCHUN WONG

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913–1976)
The Prince of the Pagodas – Ballet in three acts, Op.57

CD1

1. Prelude 2.32

ACT 1

2. Scene. The Palace of the Emperor of the Middle Kingdom 2.01
3. March 4.11
4. Entry of the Pages 1.52
5. Variation of the King of the North 1.35
6. Variation of the King of the East 2.44
7. Variation of the King of the West 1.07
8. Variation of the King of the South 2.44
9. Variation of the Princess Belle Épine 3.42
10. Variation of Princess Belle Rose and Pas de Deux 6.01
11. The Kings kneel before Belle Rose 4.48
12 The rage of the Kings 2.10
13. Four green frogs with huge wings enter, bearing a large emerald casket 3.26

ACT 2

14. Scene 1. The Strange Journey of Belle Rose to the Pagoda Land 1.42
15. Waltz 5.31
16. Belle Rose, wearing her Star dress, is borne in by the Frogs 0.51
17. Entrée. Sea horses, Fish creatures and Waves 2.03
18. Variation. Sea horses 1.37
19. Variation. Fish creatures 3.42
20. Coda. Sea horses, Fish creatures and Waves 2.48
21. Pas de Deux. Male and Female Flame 1.27
22. Variation. Male Flame 1.18
23. Variation. Female Flame 1.26
24. Coda. Male and Female Flames and Corps de Ballet of Flames 3.03

TOTAL TIMING 64.32

CD2

ACT 2 continued

1. Scene 2. The Arrival and Adventures of Belle Rose in the Kingdom of the Pagodas 2.21
2. The Pagodas revolve like merry-go-rounds 8.29
3. Pas de Deux. The Prince and Belle Rose 8.24

ACT 3

4. The Palace of the Middle Kingdom. Belle Épine is now princess 0.22
5. Belle Épine and the Dwarf frighten the Courtiers 3.45
6. The Emperor is carried on in a cage 7.01
7. Scene 2. The Pagoda Palace 5.06
8. Pas de Six. Entrée 2.13
9. Variation 1. Pas de Deux 3.45
10. Variation 2. Girl's solo 1.06
11. Variation 3. Boy's solo 1.11
12. Pas de Trois 2.04
13. Coda 1.30
14. Pas de Caractère. The Emperor and the Fool 1.59
15. Pas de Deux. Belle Rose and the Prince of the Pagodas 4.24
16. Variation 2. The Prince 1.11
17. Variation. Belle Rose 2.40
18. Finale 2.15
19. Boys of the Pas de Six 0.33
20. The Emperor and the Fool 0.49
21. Girls of the Pas de Six 0.54
22. The Prince of the Pagodas 0.20
23. Belle Rose 0.22
24. Apotheosis 1.40

TOTAL TIMING 64.31

CD HLD 7565

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I first encountered *The Prince of the Pagodas* during my composition studies in Singapore, where my interest in Balinese Gamelan intersected with Benjamin Britten's innovative approach in incorporating it in his ballet. Initially, I believed Britten had used authentic Gamelan instruments in the Pagoda Land section, only to discover he ingeniously recreated these sounds with a creative blend of standard Western orchestral instruments. Beyond technical prowess, Britten's compositions, including this ballet, display a profound sense of pacing and dramatic flair honed through his extensive operatic repertoire, with each musical theme vividly portraying its corresponding character's emotions and narratives.

My stay at the Red House in Aldeburgh in the summer of 2023 was both a privilege and a transformative experience. It deepened my admiration for Britten's artistic genius and offered valuable insights into his compositional methods. His manuscripts, diaries, and letters illuminated his remarkable ability to mentally compose entire works, transcribing them with exceptional precision later on. This priceless memory, alongside Colin Matthews's invaluable presence at our rehearsals, has been most helpful in the six full days we spent recording the score.

As a Southeast Asian influenced by diverse folk traditions and a profound love for Western classical music, Britten's music resonates deeply inside me. His adept incorporation of non-Western elements in some of his works exemplifies a fusion that respects diverse musical heritages while pushing artistic boundaries. *The Prince of the Pagodas* underscores the universal language of music through its Eastern and Western idioms, making it an ideal foundation to delve into cultural intersections in my new artistic journey with the Hallé.

Kahchun Wong, Hallé Principal Conductor and Artisitc Advisor, June 2024

TO IMOGEN HOLST FS/1

THE PRINCE OF THE PAGODAS

A BALLET IN 3 ACTS

BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Z-9300894

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THE PRINCE OF THE PAGODAS

Benjamin Britten had a somewhat chequered history with dance. As early as 1931, when a seventeen-year-old student at the Royal College of Music, he wrote a 30-minute ballet entitled *Plymouth Town* to a scenario by Violet Alford, the internationally recognised authority on folk dancing, which he submitted to the short-lived yet influential Camargo Society who commissioned and produced new dance pieces such as Vaughan Williams's *Job* and Walton's *Façade*. The Society rejected Britten's ballet and it remained unperformed until 2004. Britten and Alford began work on another ballet in 1932, this time on a Basque theme, which remained unfinished. The burgeoning interest in dance in the UK during the 1930s, led by figures such as Frederick Ashton, Ninette de Valois, Marie Rambert and Alicia Markova, inevitably encouraged composers to turn to the medium, and Britten was no exception: however, none of his proposed original projects from this period was realised.

Britten's concert music drew choreographers' attention from the 1930s onwards, with Ashton, for example, using the score of the *Frank Bridge Variations* (1937) for a successful one-act ballet. This practice would continue during Britten's years in the United States (1939–42), with the composer forming links with Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine, for whose American Ballet Company he would fashion a second set of Rossini arrangements, *Matinées Musicales* (1941), to join the earlier set, *Soirées Musicales* (1937), to form a dance piece, as well as making an orchestration of *Les Sylphides* (music by Chopin) in 1941.

Dance also played a key role in two of Britten's operas: *Gloriana* (1953), where, during Elizabeth I's progress to Norwich in Act II, a formal masque is offered in homage to the queen, and later in the same act a sequence of Elizabethan dances for the court form the musical substance of a whole scene; and *Death in Venice* (1973), where choreographed movement and gesture rather than singing are employed by Britten for the Polish boy Tadzio, his family and friends.

Both dance scenes in *Gloriana* were choreographed by John Cranko (1927–1973), who was introduced to Britten by the artist and theatre designer John Piper, an established collaborator of the composer. Cranko was a protégé of de Valois and the Sadler's Wells Ballet. He had achieved earlier popular success with the ballet *Pineapple Poll* (1951), based on music by Sullivan, had worked at the Aldeburgh Festival, and in 1953 revived *Peter Grimes* at Covent Garden. Britten liked and admired Cranko and, when approached by Covent Garden for a three-act ballet – *The Prince of the Pagodas* – for the flagship Sadler's Wells Ballet, it was with the twenty-seven-year-old Cranko that he wished to collaborate.

The Prince of the Pagodas, the first evening-length score commissioned by Sadler's Wells Ballet, originated as early as January 1954 when the commission was announced by the company and slated to receive its first production as part of the 1954/55 Season. Cranko devised his own scenario, which blended elements drawn from *King Lear*, *Beauty and the Beast* and Madame D'Aulnoy's 1782 fairy-tale *Serpentin Vert*; the latter, 'The Green Serpent', provides the working title of the detailed draft scenario in Cranko's hand, from which Britten evidently worked while writing *Pagodas*.

As Britten was to discover, the compositional processes involved in writing an evening-length ballet score were of an altogether different magnitude from those required for writing operas, in which, by the time he started work on *Pagodas* in late 1954 or possibly early 1955, he was well-versed; with *The Prince of the Pagodas*, however, he found himself in distinctly uncharted territory. The collaboration between the composer and Cranko was of a very different order from that Britten experienced when working with William Plomer (*Gloriana*) or Myfawny Piper (*The Turn of the Screw*), at that time his two most recent librettists. Having devised his scenario and provided the composer with a list of individual dances and their approximate durations, Cranko would appear to have largely abandoned Britten to his own devices. One wonders if the situation Britten found himself in – i.e. with Cranko's scenario or

'shooting script' (the choreographer's term obviously borrowed from cinema) – did not recall his days, twenty years earlier, writing incidental music, stopwatch in hand, for the documentary film movement. Certainly, this document acted as a valuable stimulus to the composer. There were, of course, occasional meetings and discussion of the ballet with Cranko, as well as with Ninette de Valois and others; but Cranko's close involvement with the project would only fully recommence with the fashioning of the choreography, which could occur only after Britten had completed his composition draft and the piano rehearsal score had been made available.

Unlike in opera, where Britten was accustomed to undertaking close scrutiny and refinement of the draft text in collaboration with his librettist, the wordless medium of ballet, in which movement and gesture convey the narrative and motivation of the characters, proved a challenge for the composer. To a creative artist of Britten's sensibilities, which throughout his career thrived on collaborating with artists from complementary disciplines, Cranko's attitude must have been frustrating, the more so as the composer had plunged into, for him, a new genre for which he most certainly would have welcomed advice from a dance practitioner.

By April 1955 Britten had made good progress with Act I, but by the summer of 1955, with his and Pears's world tour over the winter of 1955/56 looming, he was feeling the pressure to meet the delivery deadline of October 1955 and was compelled to make the first of what turned out to be more than one postponement. As his correspondence reveals, he seriously miscalculated the amount of time needed to write the ballet – an extremely rare occurrence in Britten's career – and even experienced 'writer's block' during its composition (an even rarer symptom for the composer). The composition of *The Prince of the Pagodas* left Britten scarred: his reporting to a friend of the completion of the full score on 7 November 1956 – 'That b. Ballet is FINISHED, & I feel as if I've been just let out of prison after 18 months' hard labour' – says it all. In later years, Britten could barely bring himself to open the pages of the score of what proved to be by far his most sustained purely orchestral composition (it is of approximately two hours' duration).

By the time Britten departed for his world trip in November 1955, he had reached a little way into Act II of *Pagodas*. While on the island of Bali in January 1956, he discovered – or, more accurately, rediscovered – the musical key that would unlock his creative impasse with the ballet, something that would lend aural authenticity to the fairy-tale Eastern setting of the ballet's scenario – namely, Balinese gamelan. He was able to witness at first hand Balinese gamelan (which, in fact, he had already encountered in New York in 1941 through 2-piano transcriptions by the composer and ethnomusicologist Colin McPhee), and while on Bali he made his own investigation into the riches of Balinese musical culture, hearing gamelan performances, acquiring recordings and making musical sketches, which form the basis of the highly accomplished gamelan pastiche in Act II scene 2 of the ballet. (It should be noted that gamelan influences had already made appearances in Britten's music before *Pagodas*: for example, the few bars of heterophony in the Prologue to *Paul Bunyan* (1941) when the moon turns blue; the tolling bell in the 'Sunday Morning' interlude from *Peter Grimes* (1945); and the obvious gamelan influences in the percussion writing in *The Turn of the Screw* (1954).)

Britten's enthusiasm for gamelan is palpable in a letter to his assistant, Imogen Holst, sent from Bali on 17 January 1956: 'The music is *fantastically* rich – melodically, rhythmically, texturally (such *orchestration*!!) & above all, *formally*. It is a remarkable culture [...] we go to rehearsals, find out about & visit cremations, trance dances, shadow plays – a bewildering richness. At last I'm beginning to catch on to the technique, but it's about as complicated as Schoenberg.'

Significantly, on the same day that Britten arranged to have tape recordings made of the Balinese music that would provide the fundamental material for the *Pagodas* gamelan, he sent a

telegram to Ninette de Valois: 'CONFIDENT BALLET READY FOR MIDSEPTEMBER LOVE BRITTEN' (23 January 1956). Despite his note of optimism, the workload on his return was still too great and the revised deadline had to be abandoned.

While the gamelan pastiche was a novel aspect of *Pagodas*, one which was rather misunderstood by the work's first critics, its effects on Britten's musical language – structurally, melodically, harmonically and instrumentally – were long-term, to be fully absorbed in his final opera, *Death in Venice*. So dazzling is the gamelan recreation in *Pagodas* and its significance to Britten's subsequent development, that it's all too easy to overlook the remarkable qualities of the remainder of the score: its prodigious invention; entrancing and memorable melodies; infectious rhythms; and, perhaps above all, Britten's virtuosic scoring for large orchestra. *The Prince of the Pagodas* is undoubtedly Britten's homage to the great Russian ballet tradition of Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev and Stravinsky (especially *Apollon musagète*), all of whose masterly scores Britten knew thoroughly and kept at hand while writing *Pagodas*.

Despite the episodic nature of a sequence of short dances in closed forms, Britten employs the kind of close-knit thematic organisation and overall formal architecture that characterise his operas and other large-scale works. Indeed, the juxtaposition of dances referencing different periods and musical styles is breath-taking and hugely seductive. As in Britten's operas, the principal characters are sharply defined by their own melodies and distinctive instrumental colours: for example, a Tchaikovsky-inspired oboe melody for the heroine Belle Rose; a jagged string melody for her 'evil' sister Belle Epine; heroic triplet fanfares on trumpet for the Prince; and a plaintive alto saxophone for the Old Emperor. Britten also indulges in making the occasional in-joke: he evidently could not resist using a twelve-note theme for the King of the West's variation in Act I, the 'King of the West' being either the Los Angeles-based Schoenberg (died 1951) or Stravinsky, who had recently begun his own journey with dodecaphonic composition.

Premiered on 1 January 1957 by the Sadler's Wells Ballet at Covent Garden under the composer's baton, *Pagodas* entered the company's repertory until 1960 after which it was quietly dropped. There were occasional new productions during the composer's lifetime, notably in Stuttgart (1968, again choreographed by Cranko) and in Leningrad (1971), but Britten's interest in the work waned and he never created his own suite of music from the score. Even his Decca recording, made shortly after the premiere, was cut, losing about 20 minutes' music to ensure it fitted onto two LPs. It was not until 1990, with the release of a complete recording conducted by Oliver Knussen (a long-standing *Pagodas* enthusiast), that this remarkable score could be appreciated in its totality – Britten's concerto for orchestra in all but name. And now we can welcome a second complete recording, from the Hallé under its new chief conductor to bring this remarkable score to a whole new generation.

Britten's interest in ballet did not end with *The Prince of the Pagodas*. In the 1970s he and the Australian artist Sidney Nolan planned a new ballet for Covent Garden on an Aboriginal theme. Entitled *The Initiation*, it was intended to explore aspects of Western and Aboriginal culture and point up the shortcomings of the wanting. Nolan drafted a scenario which survives among Britten's papers. But the composer's failing health – he died in 1976, aged 63 – put paid to what would have been a fascinating project, which presumably would have opened up opportunities for indigenous Australian music in the same way that *Pagodas* had for the Balinese gamelan.

© Philip Reed

SYNOPSIS

In part *Beauty and the Beast*, in part *King Lear*, the plot of *The Prince of the Pagodas* has been interpreted in different ways by different choreographers – for example John Cranko in 1957 and Kenneth MacMillan in 1989 – but this fantastical story's essence remains the same.

An Emperor with two daughters – the older Belle Épine, the younger Belle Rose – must decide who inherits his Kingdom. Jealousy strikes Épine who seizes control. Rose is flown away to The Land of the Pagodas by magical winged frogs where she meets a Prince who is cast as a salamander.

They return to rescue the kingdom from the evil Épine's clutches. The Prince, who metamorphoses back to human form, and Rose marry, living happily ever after.

The Hallé and Hallé Choir in The Bridgewater Hall © Alex Burns, the Hallé

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Balance and Master Engineer: Steve Portnoi
Assistant Engineers: Niall Gault and Edward Cittanova

Artistic Advisor: Colin Matthews

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